

## REMEMBERING THE FORGETFUL

*(A nostalgic homage to Prof. Debabrata Goswami Sir)*

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My student days at Jorhat Engineering College (JEC) were filled with stories, not only of teachers from JEC but equally of those from Assam Engineering College (AEC), Jalukbari, Guwahati. Despite JEC having had famous teachers as Profs. Shashi Chandra Sarma, Samudra Dev Phukan, Amiyo Kumar Deb to name a few, gossips about goody goody teachers of AEC namely, Profs. Debabrata Goswami, Aparna Kumar Padmapati, Surendra Nath Medhi and others attracted good listeners from amongst us. Of these, Medhi Sir's face and temperament were familiar to the JECians, for he was a yearly certainty at JEC as external examiner in Physics Practical.

So, for me, the faces of the other famous and respected teachers of AEC were unknown when I joined this premier institution as a Lecturer in Mechanical Engineering. It was during a summer vacation that I reported to Prof. Debabrata Goswami, Principal, Assam Engineering College. The quiet ambience touched me deep and instilled a '*bhaal loga*' feeling. Obviously then, I walked in for a cool reporting.

Sir looked at me and commented, "Hi, you! Ummm. . . I've seen you somewhere. Could be, some months back. Am I right? Can you recall?"

My second interaction with Sir! I had heard a lot about him, had an interaction too during the APSC selection process for this job of mine, but those were definitely not enough to know this great but simple and plain-speaking senior. Punching an extra dose of politeness to my usual one, I submitted, "Yes sir, you're right. You had, as an APSC expert, interviewed me a few months ago for this post."

"There you are. Right, I recall now. So, it's me who selected you. Isn't it? I am sure, then, you will be good, my selection. . . . *Achcha, hobo. Tumi xei Bongali lorato, nohoy jano?*"

I had, in the meantime, placed on his table, a copy of my appointment letter (issued by Govt. of Assam). Without casting a look at it, he asked, "What's your name?"

I obliged.

Sir laughed heartily and remarked, "Oh, Banerjee! *Logun aase ne nai? Bhaal. . . Bhaal. Bamunor lora; you must teach well. Stay here and prosper.*"

He pressed the bell, called for the Head Assistant and asked him to prepare my joining report. Thanking him, I attempted to step out of the chamber when he said, "*Era, jowa naki!* I didn't offer you a seat at all. All the while, you have been standing and talking. That should not be. *Tumi. . . tumi. . . tumi. . . etiyaa more colleague. Boha. Okomaan bohi jowa.*"

I acted the obliging boy again.



The Head Assistant had been a silent spectator to this scene. Later in the afternoon, when I went to him to enquire about my copy of the joining report, he told me, "Goswami Sir has given you a very good treatment. You are fortunate."

I thanked my day.

Those days, AEC suffered from shortage of staff quarters. On my request for being provided with a family accommodation in the campus, I was allotted two rooms of the PG hostel (an Assam Type house; not in a very good condition now), on the right hand side of the main road to college and next to Hostel No. 5. A month later, Prof. R. N. Baruah of Civil Engineering department came with his family as my next door neighbour. The two families of ours had occupied half of the PG hostel. Pratul Chandra Barua, Ratul Sharma, Haren Kalita and a few others, the latest graduates from AEC, who had recently joined as lecturers, lived under the other half of the same roof. My one-year old daughter was everybody's attraction.

The house has a *Krishnachura* (gulmohar) tree in its front yard.

A few days after I had taken possession of the official accommodation in the college campus, one bright Sunday morning, Goswami Sir happened to drive out to the city. Casting a look to his left, he saw me standing near the tree and doing nothing. Sir stopped his Fiat, got down and walked a few steps towards me, "Hello, Banerjee, when did you shift here? Who is she, your wife?" He rightly pointed to the young lady playing with her child on the veranda.

"Good morning, Sir. It's about two weeks I've been here."

"Two weeks, ummm. . . a long enough period. But this is an official accommodation. Have you taken the permission?"

Good God! I wondered. How could he forget?

"Yes, Sir," I promptly replied.

"From whom, Padmapati?"

"No, Sir, you only had approved my application for official accommodation."

"*Moi*? I've approved your application? *Hobo*. . . You're definitely not lying. I do forget sometimes. Take care. Ask Nazir for any assistance you require." Then he turned to my wife and said, "*Aahibaa, aamaar ghorot aahibaa*. Visit us sometimes. And one thing, don't use an electric heater for cooking! Too many of you are connected to a common meter here."

Driving a few yards forward, Sir stopped again. He found some students waiting near 'Hostel No. 5 Bus Stop' to board the ASTC bus for a trip to the city. Sunday morning English movies were big attractions for the young generation. Watching him slowing down, all except three managed to disappear from the spot. And, Sir didn't need more. He stopped and ordered them to get into the car. That was his style of loving the students. He did so with two intentions; helping the students, and himself travelling in a company. The students had no option but to abide by. It would have been a joyride for them, had Sir driven straight to the city and dropped them at Fancy Bazaar point. They could have comfortably made it to Urvashi Cinema Hall. But, Sundays are not always sunny! Things turned gloomy soon. Sir's car developed a mechanical snag somewhere near Adabari. The students panicked as Sir opened the bonnet and asked them to join him in



identifying and repairing the fault. The Lord's diktat, who could defy? And you know, only one of the students was from Mechanical Engineering (who later had narrated the story) while the other two were from Civil Engineering. Hard work and real knowledge! By the time, the car was rid of the fault, it was half past mid-day. Dumping the tentative city trip in the *meteka paani* (water body with hyacinth) of Adabari, Sir and the students returned to Jalukbari.

Gowami Sir had a dual degree in Engineering, Mechanical and Electrical. A superb Mechanical Engineer, he knew the practical things extremely well. And, so was Padmapati Sir. I was lucky to have learnt from both these greats. Truly speaking, inspite of being engineers, how many of us can instantly attend to a moody car's whims and cool it down? Yes, Professor Goswami had it in him.

A unique and adorable person from <sup>all</sup> counts, Goswami Sir was also a genuine and heavy smoker. Genuine in the sense that he didn't bother about the brand or the size. Packs of three or four brands of cigarettes, from normal to king size, adorned (!) his table any time. On the day of my joining, as I was talking to him, I found two half-open packets on his table where from the martyrs in waiting, peeping out, tried to lure me. I smiled at them. Pushing temptation miles away, I silently advised the small sticks of big addiction, "You, the sacrificing heroes, why hurry for death? Have some more breath. Goswami Sir is there, to light your pyre."

Barring the last few years of my teaching career, I had always taken an early morning class, I mean, the class in the first hour at 8 O'clock. My students liked it; could be I tasted garden-fresh at that hour! The ASTC service at 7:15 a.m., piloted by that gigantic figured Sri Bir Singh, ferried me from the city to AEC, Jalukbari. Goswami Sir often took a morning stroll round the college. That way, we met quite often and used to have interesting exchanges. He would enter my chamber, light a cigarette, keep mum for a few seconds and then ask, "*Khuwa neki, Banerjee, tumi cigarette khuwa neki* (Do you smoke)?" Before I could nod for or against, he would continue, "*Hobo diya, nalagay kobo. Aajikaali xokoloye khaay* (Leave it, everybody smokes these days). By the by, Banerjee, wherefrom did you pass your B. E.?" Having been rooted at Jorhat until passing my degree in Engineering, I had no opportunity to be a class room student of Prof. Goswami. Could be, that was the reason why Sir always forgot my source. As I was about to reply, he said, "*Hoy hoy, monot porisey. Jorhat* (Yes, I do remember, it was from JEC)." Yes Sir, very right, you could not be wrong. I had told you the same thing a hundred times.

It was the day of my APSC selection interview for a lecturer's post in the Engineering Colleges of Assam. Medicating myself with high potency doses of Thermodynamics and I. C. Engines, I entered the interview room. Prof. Debabrata Goswami was the expert; my first interaction with the genius.

No pretention, no formality; he asked me point blank, "You are a Banerjee? *Ghar kot tomar*, where are you from?"

"Jorhat, I am from Jorhat," I asserted.

"Jorhat?" He wondered. "*Taat Banerjee aase ney?*"

"Yes Sir, I am born and brought up at Jorhat."

"Good, very good", he changed the topic and pointed towards my right ring-finger, "What's that you are wearing?"

"A ring," I quipped.



"I do not mean that. Tell me what it is made of. That's my question."

"Gold," my answer was shortest.

He countered, "*Eko najana*, can it be made of gold only?"

The following fifteen minutes belonged to Sir when he talked about Metallurgy, Heat treatment, Vibration etc., but nothing on Thermodynamics, my pet. And also, there was nothing on Automobiles, the subject that Sir championed.

The interview was nearing its end as Sir prepared to pack-up. I started wondering how he would select or reject me! Throughout the interview, it was he, who talked the most. I got little scope either to exert myself or to prove myself a novice! My world of Thermodynamics remained unexplored!! I looked at him and didn't know why, developed a special respect. That was it. I didn't try to read his face though, perhaps, he could read my eyes. The message came clear at the moment of separation. As I was to leave the room, Sir took a long puff and assured me, "*Theekey aasey*. It's alright. You are welcome." The words gifted me with a lifetime passport to travel through 'The Land of Students'. It is four decades now. I am still a wanderer as I find my travel mates evergreen. Sir, you have been the biggest Passport Officer in my career.

Goswami Sir owned an Assam Type house in Rehabari wherein the Rehabari Post Office was located. For some years during the late seventies and the early eighties of the last century, I stayed in a rented house very near to that place. Sir came to know of it during one of our morning meetings.

"Is it, you stay close to the Rehabari Post Office? Then, do me a service, Banerjee."

"Order me, Sir."

"That house is mine. I own it. You visit the Post Office as often as you can and report me about the condition of the house. I know they are not maintaining it properly."

Agreeing, I said, "You are right, Sir; the house is not in very good shape."

I paused for a moment and proposed, "You can do one thing, Sir; rent it to me. I will take care of the house."

"*Tumi kintu eko beya kowa naai*, you are talking sense," he retorted.

About to take leave of me, he added, "But, you know, that won't be easy. Once you let a house to the Government, it's very difficult to get it vacated. Anyway, have a look at the house occasionally and keep me posted."

"That will be my pleasure, Sir."

Yes Sir, wherever and up to whatever, you may be now; I am here, still on this materialistic Earth, looking for a better accommodation. Please, provide me with one somewhere close to yours. That will be highly rewarding for me.

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